Heaven on Earth

A Parochial Sermon

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MARCH, 1917

PUBLISHED BY A FRIEND

I WILL walk before the Lord in the land of the living.—Ps. 116; verse 9.

THE Psalmist celebrates his recovery from a serious illness and rejoices that he is privileged to serve God on this fair earth. He yearns for no Elysian fields or Paradisaical glories. He evidently found his Heaven on earth.

Our truest wisdom is to adopt his point of view. Those who walk before the Lord in the land of the living have entered into heavenly places with Christ Jesus. We should realize this more vividly if we had not allowed our imaginations to be dominated—I had almost said stained—by the Oriental imagery of the Book of the Revelation. Those crude pictures of the New Jerusalem with its jeweled glories and crystal sea, with its gorgeous ritual and everlasting symphonies, were doubtless unspeakably alluring to the splendor-loving, excitement-craving people of the East, but they have lost their charm for lovers of the beauty of Nature or eager seekers for close and spiritual communion with God. No sea of glass could compare with the ocean that flings high its spray upon New England's rocky coast, or charges in long lines of foam-crested billows upon New Jersey's level sands. No gates of pearl, or chrysoprase or emerald can equal in splendor the cloudy gates through which the sun takes its departure. To the purged vision, Earth is crammed with heaven, and every common bush afire with God. Only the rude culture of primitive peoples can regard those pictures of the Apocalypse as comparable in charm to the landscapes that refresh our eyes in many favored spots upon this third planet from the sun. The last book in the New Testament doubtless served a useful purpose in cheering a persecuted Church. But it is expedient now that we should recall that the Early Church was doubtful

whether the book should be included in the Canon, and that the conservative Eastern Church excluded it from the place of authority for a thousand years. Heaven is a state and not a place. It is a state which may be enjoyed while we are in the flesh. We need not wait till we are translated to other conditions. The poets have frequently reminded us that Heaven lies about us in our infancy. But if we would open our eyes to the realities of life, we would discover that Heaven may be found at any age.

The idea that Hell may be found on Earth is common enough. Many a sinner has confessed this truth. Carlyle was fond of quoting the saying of the Hindu mystic Ram Dass that he had fire enough in his belly to consume the whole earth. Many a man, crying out that he had played the fool exceedingly has lifted up his eyes being in torment and moaned out his grief and despair. Believers in the moral government of the Universe have often pointed out that we need not look to a life beyond for the punishment of Sin. This is true enough. On the Sunday this winter, when a man who had murdered a young woman a few nights before, sat in our gallery, with some friends, and listened to the service and sermon, we had among us a soul in torment. Shortly afterwards he committed suicide, rushing violently out of this unbearable life to see if he could not better his condition elsewhere, or snuff himself out of existence. Poor soul, we cry, he was in Hell, tormented in the flames of remorse and fear and horror. We could not dip our finger in water and cool his parched lips. But while we realize that Hell can begin here for the prodigal, we fail to appreciate the correlative truth that Heaven also opens itself here to the pardoned and reconciled child of God. For Heaven and Hell not being places, but states, may lie close together. Like Day and Night they are not geographical terms; but indicate conditions. As it may be day on the mountain top, though it is still night in the deep valley at its base, so people may be standing side by side in the closest association; yet one be living in Hell and

the other dwelling in Heaven. If we have eyes to see the penalties of Hell on earth, why should we refuse to confess that the blessedness of Heaven can begin here?

Never can I forget how this truth first flashed upon me. A long and painful illness had carried me down to the gates of death. In hours of pain and delirium I had hung over the verge of the precipice of Time and looked down into the swirling abyss of Eternity. Racked by pain and conflicting desires I wondered whether death would not be a sweet release, like an escape from a dark, dank cellar infested with poisonous snakes. Then the fever left me, and I lay like a shipwrecked sailor cast upon the shore of some tropical island, exhausted and battered, but safe. Never had I realized before the beauty of this earth. How musical was the rustle of the leaves in the summer wind, the twitter of birds, the clear and exultant morning call of chanticleer, the rattle of the well-buckets! How delicate and tender the tints of earth and sky! Above all, what a joy it was to see bending over me the loving face of my wife and to behold my dear ones. Surely, I thought, heaven is found on earth. The glory of that moment of insight has never entirely faded away. At times, when the sky has been overcast with storm-clouds and the earth has shaken with convulsions, I have doubted whether that vision was true. But, eventually, I have always been able to dissipate my doubts.

It is a delusion to hold that this planet must be left before we can enter Heaven. Why should this place be inconsistent with that state? Is there any place in the universe that we prefer to this earth? If the option were given you, is there any position in space that you would prefer to occupy? There are no scenes so dear to your heart as the scenes of this friendly earth and fair. Here you are standing beside the persons in all the universe who are closest to you in love and in sympathy. No others need you so much. In no other place can you so help them. If your home caught on fire, and in a moment of excitement

you rushed out by the nearest fire-escape, and left all your family in peril, would not such a place of physical safety be also a place of mental torment? Would not you yearn to run back to their rescue? Would it not seem the joy of Paradise to be standing again beside them in the fire-encircled room, out of whose floor the smoke was pouring and round whose door the flame was playing, and to be lowering to safety some woman or child, rather than stand out of it all in shameful security?

Suppose that you are sick and find it hard to keep up. It is probable that you would rather be sick and keeping up painfully as you are and helping the causes or people that you love than that they should miss your assistance. A state in which one is powerless to help is surely not a state of blessedness. Dickens could imagine no more suitable punishment for the miserly and cruel than to give them a vision of the needs of humanity without the power to aid. In the immortal Christmas Carol he represents Scrooge looking out of the window in desperate curiosity when Marley's ghost left him. "The air was filled with phantoms wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went. Everyone of them wore chains like Marley's Ghost; some few (they might be guilty governments) were linked together, none were free. Many had been personally known to Scrooge in their lives. He had been quite familiar with one old ghost in a white waistcoat, with a monstrous iron safe attached to its ankle, who cried piteously at being unable to assist a wretched woman with an infant, whom it saw below upon a door step. The misery with them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere for good in human matters and had lost the power forever."

No living man has lost that power. As long as we live, we can help to some degree. Lord Shaftesbury said that he hated to leave a scene where there was so much misery to be relieved. If we can't run in the arena, we can hearten the runners by our cheers, we can reward them by our plaudits, we can console them by our gratitude for their exertions.

But some may object that Heaven is always pictured to us as a place of rest. I answer that is an Orientalism that we need to eliminate from our religion. It is one of those Asiatic modes of thought which closely wedded as they are to the Mediæval interpretations it is the hardest and most painful task of the student to-day to occidentalize and modernize. The underfed and poorly vitalized people of the East, living under oppressive tyrannies of man, and amid overpowering heats of Nature, found all exertion a pain and a trial and set it before themselves as the goal of all spiritual endeavor to extricate themselves from this ever-revolving wheel of life and attain some final state of rest. The Heaven of the eastern imagination in the book of Revelation is too much like the Buddhist Nirvana, in its banishment of all endeavor and its ceaseless contemplation of the Divine, to be in accord with the mind of Jesus, who said My Father worketh hitherto and I work. The truly Christian view of Heaven was given by old Dr. McElhinny at the Virginia Seminary. A profound student of Hebrew, which he read without the vowel pointing and of Greek which he could decipher in the original manuscripts, the old doctor was accustomed to take his afternoon walk with a book under his arm, that he might refresh himself by occasional glances at favorite passages. Clad in his long black cloak, he was a perfect specimen of a theologian of the school of Archbishop Usher. After the example of those soundly learned men he was fond of learning by heart the classical passages in his favorite authors, and used his walks for that purpose. "Why do you keep up studying so hard?" a callow theological student asked him one day. The Doctor opened his mild, blue eyes in amazement, and explained that he hoped to go on learning throughout all eternity. He could not imagine a higher happiness. His idea of bliss was eternal progress in knowledge. He could not conceive of a heaven without work. Surely he was right. Like the disciples on the way to Emmaus our eyes are holden, if

we do not realize that our work is the source of our truest happiness.

In some mysterious way we usually do not appreciate this truth until the experience is past. The minister may groan on Sunday morning that this weekly task of preparing a sermon year after year is more than a man can endure, and wish that he were relieved from it and from the duty of soliciting reluctant people to work, of urging miserly people to give, of harmonizing quarrelsome people, of depressing unruly people, of enlightening ignorant people, of soothing sensitive people, of restraining rash people, of leading on dogmatic and stationary people, and of comforting sorrowing people. But let him be set aside by age, or infirmity and he will return to his old Church and exclaim that nothing could make him happier than to stand in that pulpit Sunday after Sunday and deliver his message and take up his old responsibilities. Our excellent Verger may sometimes think that his Sunday task is anything but heavenly—what with cold-blooded people who want every opening closed and warm blooded people who wish the windows opened, a furnace that may be cutting up as if the devil himself were inside its boiler, and all the countless annoyances incident to ministering to many men of many minds, he may yearn for the quiet task of caring for a cemetery. But let him be set aside from work and he will realize that all these trials were nothing but the pungent sauce that gave flavor to the feast of life. Distance brings out life in its true relations. The beauty of the past is not due to illusion, but to vision. Your eyes were holden. You did not realize how heavenly your condition was when the children were prattling around you and clinging to your skirts. They may have trodden on your feet; but if you had only appreciated it, you would have confessed their voices were sweeter than choirs of saints and the touch of their little hands more uplifting than angel wings. Now that they are grown you realize that you were in heavenly places in those days.

Let us not repeat the mistake. We are still marching

through Emmanuel's land. About us are camping on every side Hosts of Angels. Every place is a Mahanaim, if our hearts are filled with serene contentment, with faith and hope and love. This is strikingly expressed in one of these new metre-less poems. I am not an advocate of this formless verse, for the glory of art is victory over difficulties and not evasion of them. But this poem gripped me.

This morning I went to Heaven, where I have not been
for a long time.
I did not stop to see the sights—
The glassy golden driveways, and the great gates of pearl,
Or the be-Tiffanied foundations of the walls,
Where all the tourists come, reading out of their guide-
books:
"The first is jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalce-
dony," and so forth.
I made no stay for the show-places,
But took the first street-car out to the factory district,
And got off at a corner well-known to me in the old days
When I was a wage-slave in Heaven.
There in the middle of the block stood the old red-brick
building
Where I had slaved and sweated—God! how I hated it.
Well, I went in—
In at the big door marked "No Admittance—Keep Out."
As I rode up in the freight elevator the faces were strange
to me,
And when I went in the old work-room the noise and
smell were terrific,
And the lighting was a disgrace.
I just went in to look round—that was honestly all I came
for.
But over at the window by his tiny forge
I saw a man I knew at work—
Shaping with strong and delicate blows

A poem on the anvil.
I went up suddenly to the foreman—
A Seraph named Abdiel.
He was a quiet, stubborn little man,
And he remembered me.
I said to him, I said—
"I'd like to get my old job back."
He looked at me, then at a splinter he had run under his nail.
"You know," he said, "the processes have changed since you were here. Everything's done different."
"I know," I said. "I think I can handle the work."
Confidently, just like that!
He looked at me, and then at his splinter, and said as if annoyed,
"Come around at eight in the morning."
—Well, I suppose I'm a fool.
But when I saw that fellow at work at his anvil
My fingers ached for the sledge-handle,
And I could feel the hard-soft metal yielding itself,
Taking the strong and delicate impress of my thought.
So here I am—again a shaper of poems,
Doing the poorest-paid work in Heaven,
Where I have not been for a long time.*

This strange verse conveys a real message. Our job is our true heaven. I do not mean to imply that it would be a joy to continue always at the same tasks. Childhood was joyous, but who would continue ever a child? The children were blessings when they played around us, but it would have been agony to have had them continue children. Growth is the law of life. But it would not be good sense for a boy to be discontented at his games because he hoped after while to have nobler pursuits. Should he not rather rejoice the more in his sports, knowing that a well-used Eton is the road to a victorious Waterloo?

* Floyd Dell, in "The Conning Tower" of the New York Tribune.

So I do not mean to argue that the Hereafter must be made up of tasks, occupations, duties, just such as engage us now. When we become men we put away childish things, and when we shall enter the higher life we shall doubtless put away many trivialities of the lower life. All that I am arguing, for I believe that I am arguing and not dreaming, is that the happiness of a child of God at peace in his Father's universe can be enjoyed while we are still in the flesh and that work is not a hindrance to such an experience.

We have concocted a Buddhistic idea of Heaven, that hides from our eyes the realities of life. For instance, we are accustomed to dream of Heaven as necessarily a place of perfect safety. I do not mean of such safety as we, His children, now enjoy under the care of a Supreme Ruler and loving Father; but a different kind of safety, a safety demanding no watchfulness or faith or courage from us. This, I believe, is a false conception, out of harmony with the moral constitution of the Kosmos.

Certainly perfect safety is not a necessary condition of happiness. When the English ships were moving to take their positions in the Battle of the Baltic, Lord Nelson, walking up and down his quarter-deck, remarked to an officer that the work of death would soon begin; "but mark you," said the hero, "I would not for worlds be anywhere else." An element of peril, you see, is not inconsistent with happiness. Where there is no peril, it is hard to believe that there can be faith and courage and progress. Is it not the right conception of Heaven that it is a state of continual progress and victory where those who are the sons of God by adoption and grace are steadily progressing towards perfection in Holiness? If this be the right view, then those who are making progress are in Heavenly places in Christ Jesus, even though they have to exercise watchfulness and care. Under this theory the means of progress are to be accepted as blessings—perils, mortifications and trials are only blessings in disguise.

They are the means of cleansing the goblet that it may be meet for the Master's use. For example, that trying Irish servant girl whom you have been tempted to regard as a spirit of the pit come to rob you of your peace of mind is only a ministering angel, sent to teach you patience, tact and self-control. These things that seem against us are the angelic visitants whereby Jacob is turned into Israel, the prince.

But some will object that there is no sin, no self-disgust, no penitence in Heaven. I answer, their exclusion is inconsistent with the truly Christian idea of heaven as a state of continual progress. Without dissatisfaction with our ignorance, there would be little growth in knowledge and without dissatisfaction with self and with our conditions there would be little development of character or of energy. A flying goal, a standard that it will require an eternity to reach, necessitates a divine discontent. Such discontent is not a source of misery; it gives zest to life, as Lessing indicates in his famous saying that if the Almighty were to offer me in one hand the knowledge of the truth, and in the other the quest of truth, I would choose the latter. The self-satisfied cannot be found in Heaven, for Jesus said that its blessedness belonged to the poor in spirit. Tear away all those Oriental tropes and metaphors that obscure like a veil on the face of an Eastern woman, the beauty of Life, and you will see that if you are at peace with God, Heaven has already begun.

Some one may plead, indeed, that in Heaven we look for re-unions with the blessed. But surely the most loving companions do not expect to sit holding hands through all Eternity. There will doubtless be high enterprises in that glorious state that will separate the most loving for a season to make the joys of re-union more rapturous. Our beloved dead have only gone on a journey to the antipodes. Separations are endurable, which are only temporary. Doubtless in the Life beyond the fellowship is closer with the spirits of just men made perfect

but it will doubtless have its interruptions and its re-unions there as well as here. Love can rise above such incidents. God will doubtless reveal himself to us more fully in that higher state; but the Father of spirits has not left himself without witness here. In no part of his universe is he an absentee landlord, exacting duties and giving no personal care or presence. Whether we are in the body or out of the body, whether we are in our mortal frame or in the resurrection form, He is ever with us. With a depth and reality not possible in an earlier age we ought to make our own the language of the Psalmist.

I love Jehovah because he hath heard
The voice of my supplications;
Because he hath inclined his ear unto me,
Therefore will I call upon the name of Jehovah.

The cords of death encompassed me,
And the pains of Sheol took hold on me,
I found trouble and sorrow;
Then I called upon the name of Jehovah:

Jehovah, I beseech thee, deliver me,
O Jehovah, gracious and righteous!
Even our God, who is merciful,
(Therefore do I call on the name of Jehovah).

Jehovah hath dealt bountifully with me,
For he hath delivered my life from death,
My feet also from falling,
(Therefore do I call on the name of Jehovah).

I will walk before Jehovah
In the land of the living,
I believe, therefore, will I speak,
(And call on the name of Jehovah).

I indeed was greatly afflicted.
I said in my haste,
"Every man is a liar,"
(Therefore on the name of Jehovah will I call).

What shall I render to Jehovah,
For all his benefits toward me?
I will take the cup of salvation,
And call upon the name of Jehovah.

Precious in the eyes of Jehovah
Is the death of those who love him.
O Jehovah, truly I am thy servant,
(Therefore I call on thy name, O Jehovah).

I am thy servant, the son of thy handmaid,
Thou hast loosed my bonds,
I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving
And will call upon thy name, O Jehovah.

I will pay my vows to Jehovah,
In the presence of all his people;
In the courts of the house of Jehovah
(Will I call upon the name of Jehovah).

NOTE.—The Higher Criticism has been so frequently faulted for taking away much that has been held sacred in the past and giving nothing in return, that it gives me much pleasure to quote here the 116th Psalm in its restored liturgical form. A knowledge of the principles of Hebrew versification, and a realization of the value of the Septuagint have thrown light upon many Psalms. I have taken the liberty of abstracting this one from Kent's version, which, as far as this Psalm is concerned, follows closely the version of Dr. Cobb.